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ECONOMIC GROWTH

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Gov't, MILF keeping hopes alive on stalled peace negotiations

(Source: GMA News TV – 3/16/08 - <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/85062/Govt-MILF-keeping-hopes-alive-on-stalled-peace-negotiations>)

DAVAO CITY — Communication lines between the government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace panels are being held "behind the scenes" despite the "misconception" that talks have bogged down, Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Jesus G. Dureza said over the weekend.

He said that while others might view the other weekend's three-day MILF meeting in Butig, Lanao del Sur province as a show of force that may lead to an all-out war, the government sees the meeting as an affirmation of the Moro rebels' commitment to the peace process.

"Let's not be negative, let's always be positive and the government is working on it," he said after the third National Government Infrastructure Forum at a local hotel held in this city.

During the meeting in Butig that was attended by thousands of mujahideen (fighters) and supporters, MILF Chairman Al Haj Murad Ebrahim said the uncertainty of the peace pact is "causing anxiety to many people given the delays in the resumption of the peace talks."

Butig hosted the MILF pioneers' organizational meeting in 1978 after they broke away from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) headed by Nur Misuari.

In his so-called State of the Jihad (holy war) address on March 11, Mr. Murad said the renewal of trust is always precipitated by doubt on the state's seriousness in

the peace talks.

He added that the MILF believes that peace "is still possible" under the Arroyo administration.

Mr. Dureza said that the President also met the government peace panel on March 11, and asked for a briefing on the contentious ancestral domain.

"She's asking for legal advice to make sure that when she signs that agreement, she will keep everybody happy," he said.

The variance in opinion was supposed to have been reconciled in the 15th exploratory talks in December in Malaysia but the MILF peace panel members walked out after the government panel insisted on the constitutional process in delineating the parameters of the ancestral domain under the Bangsamoro (Muslim nation) Juridical Entity.

Mr. Dureza said the government could not go beyond the limits set by the law.

"That's why we need to be creative yet somehow radical within the confines of the basic framework," he said. "We can't impose our Constitution on the MILF at the moment but the government has no other way but to confine itself with the law."

Mohagher Iqbal, MILF chief negotiator, had said the ancestral domain issue would have been long resolved if the government will only abide by the previously agreed points.

In recent talks in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia on Jan. 31- Feb. 1, the MILF peace panel rejected anew the proposed government draft on ancestral domain.

Mr. Iqbal said the proposal didn't include the issue of governance, the most ticklish strand in the ancestral domain agenda which forms part of the ceasefire agreement signed in Tripoli, Libya in 2001.

Jon D. Linborg, United States Agency for International Development mission director to the Philippines, said the US is closely monitoring the peace talks, even as it observes the implementation of the 1996 final peace agreement with the MNLF. — **Joel B. Escovilla, BusinessWorld**